

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 10, 2009

Secretary Hillary Rodham Clinton
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Clinton:

We write to express our deep concern about the plight of Iraq's minorities, including Assyrians, Chaldeans, Syriac Christians, Yezidis, and Sabeen Mandaeans. As the American military begins to reduce its presence in Iraq, we urge the U.S. Department of State to work with the Government of Iraq to ensure that a comprehensive strategy is put in place for the security and survival of these most vulnerable and ancient communities.

As you know, Iraq's minorities have suffered disproportionately over the past six years, as their country has been wracked by violence. Because the members of these small communities do not possess militia or tribal structures of their own to defend themselves, and because of their minority beliefs, they have been uniquely vulnerable to attack and intimidation by extremists. Significant numbers of the inhabitants of these communities have been forced to flee from their homes, either to other parts of Iraq or to other countries. In addition, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom reports that they face economic, political, and legal marginalization and discrimination in Iraq, including in the provision of essential government services.

The scope of the devastation inflicted on these communities is chilling. It is believed that there were approximately 1.4 million Christians in Iraq in 2003; today, it is estimated that only 500,000 to 700,000 indigenous Christians remain. Sabeen Mandaeans—followers of John the Baptist who are prohibited under their religion from using weapons—report that almost 90 percent of their small community has either fled Iraq or been killed, leaving only an estimated 3,500 to 5,000 Mandaeans in Iraq. It is reported that the Yezidi population has likewise dropped precipitously, from 700,000 in 2005 to approximately 500,000 today.

As the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recently warned, these ancient communities face nothing less than "a serious threat to... [their] very existence." Their destruction, after countless centuries living in Iraq, would represent a tragedy for all humankind, as well as jeopardize Iraq's future as a diverse and pluralistic society.

While we recognize that the Administration has many urgent and competing priorities in Iraq, the plight of the country's religious minorities represent a unique moral responsibility for the United States. At stake is nothing less than the survival or extinction of entire religions and cultures that date back thousands of years.

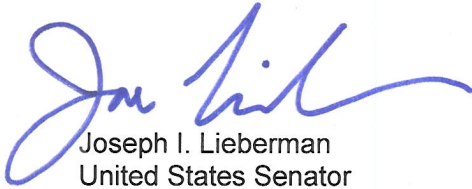
For this reason, we urge you to assign highest priority to the protection and preservation of Iraq's minorities in our bilateral relations with the Government of Iraq. In particular, it is clear that our Iraqi partners do not yet have in place an effective, well-resourced national policy to protect these communities and ensure they can live safely and prosperously in their ancestral

homeland. We believe that it is imperative that the Iraqis develop and implement such a policy, and the United States work assiduously to support it.


We also believe that it is imperative for a single high-ranking U.S. official to be put in charge of handling minority issues at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad.

We thank you for your attention to this urgent and sensitive matter, and look forward to hearing from you about the specific actions you intend to take to help save some of Iraq's most vulnerable communities from destruction.

Sincerely,



Joseph I. Lieberman
United States Senator



Susan M. Collins
United States Senator